

Immigration in Mount Morris and the Surrounding Areas

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Immigration has influenced the Illinois region since the end of the Blackhawk War in 1828. After the war, the area now known today as Mount Morris was settled. Only a few immigrants came at first, but within a few years, the village of Mount Morris was founded. The people who made up the village and its surrounding area have left a mark still evident today. Mount Morris is not just a small settlement on a hill in the middle of nowhere; it is an important place in history for all its residents to know.

Most of the people who came to Mount Morris came mostly from Washington County, Maryland, while a few others came from Schuyler County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Colonel William Hamilton was sent to the area to survey townships in the Rock River area. Many immigrants were being drawn to Illinois to work in the lead mines that were opening in Galena. John Phelps was one of these men. His object was to “make a location as near as possible on a true line leading from Chicago to Galena, believing at some future day at the crossing of the Rock River, it would be a very important point.” In 1833, Phelps and his two brothers began to make several trips from his old home in Virginia to his new settlement just east of Mount Morris’s present location, bringing supplies. Phelps also had Indians in the area help him build a sawmill on Pine Creek, just upstream from where one of the first sawmills was built by Isaac Bordman. This mill was extremely busy, with farmers from over fifty miles away bringing wheat to turn into flour. Soon after, Samuel Hitt and Nathaniel

Swingley, who were Methodists from Maryland, explored the area, and then sent their colony to the area to settle.

The immigrants came from all over Europe. Lela Mae Feary Stomberg recalls the area was “settled with several different nationalities – English, German, Italian, Polish, Swedish, French, and Spanish” who “melded into a new nationality – the American.” Each nationality brought different bits of culture to the area. The English influence of the settlers helped name Stratford, a small settlement along the railroad tracks. The people selected a township form of common government, popular in the New York and Pennsylvania area, rather than the New England ways of having town meetings. They lived in stereotypical cabins around the edges of the timbered areas, which were familiar to where they had last lived. The people tended to stay away from the prairie grasses because of the destruction of the prairie fires. As soon as the people realized the value of the prairie land, farming became prosperous.

The community benefited greatly from the printing gear brought by the Kable family, who were Pennsylvania Germans. The Kable brothers, Harvey and Harry, contributed greatly to the developing neighborhood. They successfully started the Kable Company, a printing business, which, according to Harry, transformed Mount Morris into “a city in miniature” so that “before the turn of the century, Mount Morris was a typical Midwestern country town.” Kable created jobs for the people of the growing village. The Kable brothers also started the Kable Band, the first band in Ogle County, still playing today. Later in their lives, the Kable brothers were able to help fund a community gym and Sunset Hill, the public recreational facility, both of which are still in use today.

The Methodist founders that immigrated to Mount Morris held education in high regard. The first schools were held in private homes, and then actual schoolhouses began to appear. The schools had a high literacy rate compared to most in the area. Usually books were confined only to study material, but Mount Morris had an unusually high-quality library for a small town. Games were limited at the schools because the only recreational objects they possessed were a ball, bat, and an occasional stick. The children usually played base games, tag, and other games that did not need physical objects. The schools were exceptionally small; so diminutive were they that during the football games, the players would have to come off the field to play in the band. Nevertheless, the community members still valued all that the schools offered.

Others groups besides the churches were active in the surrounding community. The Ku Klux Klan operated in Mount Morris, but never caused any physical violence. The most prominent memory of the KKK to one historian was “a huge fiery cross at a rally in the cornfield behind our house and of hooded figures subsequently parading through the town on horseback.” An elite group of Masons helped found the village of Mount Morris, but their presence never had much influence on the people living there, even with their reputation of being anti-Catholic. The Women’s Club is to thank for the White Pines State Park. Without their persistence, the state of Illinois would not have agreed to buy the land and protect it for the years to come.

Immigration influences all communities all over the world. The people who decide to immigrate to different lands choose to bring with them their ideas, beliefs, and heritage. Little did the immigrants know that when they came to live in America, their actions would be fueling their communities for hundreds of years after they were gone.

In the case of Mount Morris, Illinois, their influence still thrives. [From Esther E. Buskohl, *Townline Road*; Harry G. Kable, *Mount Morris*; Jane Shoemaker, *Pine Creek Recollections Revisited*; Donald L. Smith, *My Town*; and Wanda Sheely Wiggins, *Pine Creek – People – Places – Times*.]